

In the Absence of Effective Global Governance, Security Policy Based on Political Realism Makes Sense

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To political realists, the world is a dangerous place, anarchic and without any central body to enforce international law or any universal system of morality. Consequently, states cannot trust each other, and have a duty towards their citizens to maximise their power in order to ensure their protection. A political leader may have a strong sense of personal morality, but this must be put aside in the face of possible threats to the safety and welfare of the people who have entrusted him/her with high office. Other forms of guaranteeing state and international security, for instance through collective security, are contingent on trust and optimistic interpretations of human nature. Consequently they have flaws and loopholes where realism does not, and the current emphasis on liberal intervention could be making the world less stable, and therefore less secure.



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Realists claim to see the world as it is, not as it should be, conceding that what they see is rarely attractive. They are skeptical about attempts at global governance, and, indeed, the ‘modern realist’ school of international relations arose in the 1950s as a reaction to the failure of the League of Nations, a body realists saw as full of good intentions but with no practical means of realizing those aims. Central to the realist worldview is the state’s pursuit of Power - which we might define as ‘the capability to ‘achieve ends despite opposition’; the centrality of military force to that power, and the inevitability of conflict in a world full of competing sovereignties and bad intentions. To realists, the international system is anarchic, with no universally recognised central authority to impose order on the international community; sovereignty, at least currently, is therefore inherent to nation-states. States have needs which may be mutually incompatible, and a state can never be entirely sure about the intentions of others, and thus, can never be certain that it is not at risk of attack. Consequently, in a world in which states are ready, and potentially willing, to attack each other, states interested in preserving their sovereignty - which presumably most are - must be wary of trusting others. States agree to cooperate for practical or ideological reasons, but all that is required to upset any international community is for one state to act selfishly. Moreover, with no central authority to turn to for help, and no deterrent to aggression other than the survival instincts of third parties, states have even more reasons to be afraid. Thus states must help themselves, by pursuing ‘Interest defined as Power’.¹ Power is intangible, only capable of being measured in relative terms. For instance, Paul Kennedy reminds us that Britain is now richer in absolute terms than it was in the Victorian period, and its forces possess destructive power beyond the wildest dreams of Victorian commanders, but this is of little consequence when Britain’s share of world GDP has shrunk from 25% to 3%, and it shares the world stage with the great armed powers of the USA and China.² In a world where power is all, as Thucydides put it, the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must. Indeed, there are plenty of historical examples to support this,

¹ For an introduction to the tenets of realism, see Morgenthau, H. (1967) *Politics among Nations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp.4-15, or Waltz, K. (1954) *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.16-41.

² Kennedy, P. (1989) *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. London: Fontana, p.xxv.

from Hitler's seizure of Austria and Czechoslovakia in the 1930s to Stalin's conquest of Eastern Europe the following decade to the current international posturing over Ukraine.³

Realists do not deny the role of morality and law in interstate relations; they merely argue that they are less important than others might wish. It is certainly important for political leaders to have an ethical code, or at least a sense of honour, as this is vital to building the trusting relationships on which internal political leadership and external diplomacy depend. However, realists agree with Machiavelli that in a world full of people who are not virtuous, the virtuous man cannot survive on virtue alone, and it can also be questioned whether an elected political leader's personal morals or sense of honour should be pursued to the point of compromising national security. To realists, the central mechanism for peacekeeping is not morality but the balance of power, wherein an increase in the relative Power of one state is countered by increased strength or expanded alliances of others. While this process is inherent in the international system, balance of Power policies can be pursued deliberately.

This opens the issue of whether the accumulation power in and of itself should be a national priority. Fortunately for realists, there are reasons to suggest that it should. History provides numerous examples of the weak suffering what they must, and realists accept that history has losers and victims and believe that it is the duty of policymakers to protect their constituents from that fate: since 1900, perhaps 100 million people have been killed by police or 'security' forces. Their murderers faced little resistance, because their victims could not fight for themselves. Confronted with such evidence, realists argue, public servants have no right *not* to prioritize the security of their peoples.⁴

The concepts of an 'anarchic' international system and the need for security are closely linked. St. Augustine argued that man's sinfulness necessitates government; this is borne out by historical examples of what happens when higher authority is removed, as in post-colonial Africa, or more recently in Afghanistan or Iraq since 2001. The absence of central authority entails the ab-

³ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.

⁴ Figures from Seabury, P. and Codevilla, A. (1992) *War: Ends and Means*. New York: Basic Books, pp.6-7.

sence of an entity capable of resolving disputes and of enforcing those resolutions. This perhaps explains why many policymakers currently place their faith in systems of ‘collective security’ to deter threats or restore peace when deterrence fails. Collective security agrees with realism that military power is central to international relations, but believes power can be managed through collective international institutions such as NATO or the United Nations. Collective security requires that all states agree to settle differences peacefully: paradoxically, if this were so, there would be no need for collective security arrangements. Collective security posits that states must go beyond self-interest when acting against ‘rogue’ states, instead equating their interests with the broader interests of the ‘international community.’ Specifically, states must believe that their interests are so closely linked with those of others that an attack against one becomes an attack on all. Trust is the most important component of collective security; states must be absolutely sure that others within the system will come to their aid should they be targeted by ‘rogues’.

Unlike realism, there is one fundamental question to which collective security does not provide an answer: how can states trust one another? Realists maintain that states fear one another because of their offensive military capabilities in an anarchic world and the uncertainty about the intentions of others. Collective security has nothing to say about this and condemns the balance of power, a means by which security may be increased. In this regard, the American political scientist John Mearsheimer has posed eight conundra for states participating in collective security arrangements.

Firstly, it can be difficult to distinguish between aggressor and victim, particularly in the case of pre-emptive strikes, as with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Secondly, the theory assumes that all aggression is wrong, but there are cases where conquest was possibly warranted, as in the Allied action against Germany and Japan in World War Two and against Saddam in 2003, and could be again in the case of the *Daesh* in Iraq. Thirdly, some states are friendly or hostile due to historical, ideological or cultural reasons, and may be reluctant to join collective action against their friends or alongside their enemies; it is difficult to imagine the USA using direct military force against Britain or Israel, for

instance. Fourth, even if states do agree to act collectively, there may be controversy over burden sharing, and the response of a collective security alliance can depend on the political will of its main burden sharers, as indicated by the different Western and Middle Eastern responses to the *Daesh*. Fifth, there is the problem of guaranteeing an efficient response, particularly if the aggression is unforeseen; the Western Allies took six months to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1990-91 and it has taken nearly a year for their actions against the *Daesh* to take place. From this perspective, many states are unlikely to invest in a system that only eventually delivers aid, possibly long after they have been conquered and thousands of lives have been lost. Sixth, collective security posits the threat of escalation, particularly if the aggressor has friends with strong interests in the area of conflict, as, initially, with Serbia and Russia in the 1990s or the *Daesh* with certain ruling families in the Gulf region. Seventh, the notion that states must respond automatically to aggression creates problems of sovereignty; collective security denies states the right to declare or stay out of war; states, particularly democracies, are likely to debate vociferously over whether or not to confront an aggressor, as indicated by the events of early 2003. Lastly, there are philosophical contradictions about the use of force that could impede states coming to the rescue of a victim. Collective security is rooted in the liberal notion that war is so repugnant that it should be renounced, creating doubts about the will of states not threatened directly. Indeed, most proponents of collective security generally prefer the use of diplomacy and economic sanctions over force.⁵

This leads to perhaps the principal flaw of collective security institutions - they are frequently nothing more than the expression of the will of participating nations, a fig leaf to conceal their pursuit of national interests. If those nations feel they have no stake in the conflict, they will not react; if they do, then it is not the institution itself which is promoting international law, but the participating powers. Moreover, 'peace enforcement' operations have only worked when one or more of the great powers have participated, guaranteeing adequate military might – consider the events in Bosnia in the early 1990s or in Libya in 2011. There

⁵ See Mearsheimer, J. (1994) 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19(3), pp.26-33.

are, then, reasons enough to suggest that seeking security exclusively through such a system may be imprudent, and states that recognise these problems are likely to prefer the realist practise of self-help. And yet curiously, few do.

Another feature of realism is the assumed centrality of the state to international relations. This worldview was challenged in the 1960s, when behaviouralism was presented as an alternative. Behaviouralists claim realism is oversimplified, that the growth of international communications and transnational linkages means that significant aspects of international relations now bypass the state. While behaviouralism has not produced an encompassing theory of international relations, some of its offshoots challenge the monopoly of realism, among them Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Interdependence.

FPA studies factors influencing foreign policy, and rejects one of the core tenets of realism, that the state is a unitary actor which manages its policies rationally to maximize its power. Rather, says FPA, there is fragmentation and rivalry within the state; input from the domestic community, including special interest groups and the media; as well as the ideology and career interests of military officers and policymakers. From this viewpoint, FPA provides a persuasive account of the making of foreign policy, with its occasional dithering, inconsistencies and illogicality. It was from FPA that the concept of interdependence arose. Interdependence is currently popular amongst the Western liberal 'intelligentsia' and the diplomatic community, and reworks the classical liberalism of Adam Smith and the Marquis De Montesquieu, who believed that free trade, would create an international 'division of labour'. As a consequence, they believed, the economic interests of one state would be tied to those of all others; with states able to obtain goods via trade, the need for wars and conquest would diminish.⁶ Similarly, the withdrawal of trade – 'economic sanctions' – can be used to restore the balance of power by forcing states to act as others wish.

These assumptions rest on the proposition that the state is losing its dominant position in international relations to commercial entities, and so military power is not as important as before. However, for all the talk of 'globalisation' and 'global issues',

⁶ Waltz, *Man*, pp.92-99

the nation-state remains responsible for resolving issues of war and peace, the environment and so forth. Thus, individuals still delegate security and welfare functions to the state, and transnational entities remain subject to the laws of nation-states. In many ways, the modern state is a unitary actor. Perhaps the most serious flaw in interdependence theories is that economic resources are essential to support a large security establishment, and so the relative size of a state's economy profoundly affects its standing as a military power. It is more than a coincidence that the United States of America, the greatest military power in the history of the world, has the biggest and most aggressive trading economy in the history of the world too.

It is difficult to draw a line between economic and security issues, and so relative gains must be considered even within the economic domain. Relative gains color any method of achieving bilateral trust by economic means: even if covert action were totally impossible, gaps in gains could soon be translated to military advantage. Moreover, there is a serious failure to see the limits of rationality. Economic relationships will not deter states who feel strongly enough that their interests can be served by force. The placing of most European economies onto the gold standard did not prevent the Second World War, and the USSR was supplying Germany with timber and other raw materials until the very day it was invaded in 1941 (popular myth has it that German tanks advanced east past Soviet trains carrying timber west). Most damning of all for interdependence theories, three quarters of all conflicts since 1945 have been civil wars, involving the breakup of integrated economies. Moreover, in a reversal of the classical liberal argument, some states may attempt to gain by force what they lack the patience or ability to obtain by economic means, as with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Finally, in many cases the replacement of the nation state hoped for by interdependence theorists has manifested itself in a deeply troubling manner, exemplified by ethnically based civil conflicts or the growth of unwelcome transnational movements, including terrorists, religious fundamentalists and international criminal cartels. These groups take the pull of 'Interest defined as Power' to an illogical extreme. The killing of the hundred million cited above was in many respects sanctioned by states, parties and

organizations similar, if not identical in political philosophy and method to these emergent groups. This should be cause enough for security concerns.

All this contrasts somewhat with the current stated guiding principal of the security policy of the Atlanticist powers, a hybrid of interdependence and collective security we can call ‘moral interventionism’. Moral interventionism argues that ‘civilized’ states must seek a more democratic, understanding and, by implication, peaceful world through a range of means, including military action, although this should only be used as a last resort against ‘aggressor’ states and mass violators of human rights, so that, in Tawney’s words, war becomes either a crusade or a crime.⁷ Moral interventionism combines the Utopian impulse to better the world through the muscular Christianity and ‘can do’ philosophy of the Western professional classes. Consequently, in contrast with other Utopian movements, which are generally patient and opportunistic, moral interventionism is often robustly proactive, laying at the very core of the external policies of significant political actors such as the ‘Neo-Conservatives’ that grouped around President George W. Bush and continue to dominate US Republican foreign policy, but also ‘progressivist’ parties such as Mr. Blair’s ‘New’ Labour and the new centrist-inclined British Conservative Party under David Cameron. Such a worldview is intrinsically confrontational, setting up elites, in a small number of rich states, as judge, jury and sometimes executioner for how others should live, manifested, for example, in Mr. Blair’s assertions over events from Sierra Leone to Serbia to Afghanistan, that the ends justified whatever means might have been used. The assumption that others may wish to live in Western-style, New Labour-voting liberal democracies is not only parochial but also reminiscent of cultural imperialism, and is likely to be counter-productive in practice. Moral interventionism is as Utopian as other millennialist theories of interstate relations, and is potentially as unlimited in its aims. Not only confrontations between moral interventionists and other Utopians are more likely, but also they are more likely to escalate, as the Second World War indicates.⁸

⁷ Quoted in *ibid*, p.111.

⁸ Unquestionably the best discussion of the realist versus interventionist approach to foreign affairs is that to be found in Fisher, D. (2011) *Morality and War: Can War be Just in the Twenty-First Century?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.11-27, 221-242

In denying that history has some grand purpose, realists acknowledge that it is not just their particular state or way of life that has vital interests, but all states and ways of life. These interests can be assessed rationally, and perhaps accommodated with our own. At least, we might pursue our interests so that others do not feel that theirs are threatened, thus allowing relations between states to develop in an atmosphere and manner of mutual respect and in a safer world, than in a situation dominated by those who feel they have God, ethics or historical inevitability on their side. In a world of multiple, equally valid interests, opportunities for inter-state and inter-civilizational cooperation will be greater, and true interdependence may result. Moreover, military action in the pursuit of rationally assessed state interest can surely be controlled and limited more efficiently than apocalyptic crusades, as Clausewitz argued at the very beginning of the modern era. I make no apologies for quoting again the oft-cited remark of the great British historian, Taylor: ‘Bismarck...fought “necessary” wars and killed thousands; the idealists of the twentieth century fight “just” wars and kill millions.’⁹

⁹ Quoted in Waltz, *Man*, p.114.